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Good Cheer returns to help foster kids

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POSTED: November 24, 2008

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Area foster care children will see their Christmas wishes come true this year thanks to a volunteer effort known as Operation Good Cheer.

Operation Good Cheer is a gift-giving program designed to provide Christmas presents to participants including infants, children, teenagers and adults with disabilities who are in foster care, residential treatment and group homes.

The effort began in 1971 when a group of Ford Motor Co. employees decided to pool the money they were spending on Christmas cards and give it away to a worthy cause. During the first year of the program, 66 children took part. The effort has since grown to include more than 40 of Michigan's private child and family social service agencies. This year more than 4,000 children around the state will be the recipients of Christmas gifts.

Child & Family Services of Northeast Michigan will participate this year as it has for the past few years. Of the more than 4,000 children, approximately 60 of those who will receive gifts are staying in the 13 counties serviced by the office, said James Juchartz, child welfare program director.

The state office of Child and Family Services of Michigan, Inc. in Okemos coordinates and sponsors the entirely volunteer program. Annually thousands of volunteers from several businesses, corporations, public schools, government agencies and individuals gather to purchase and wrap gifts from a wish list.

"Our main office ... sent out a letter to all the children in foster care. We submit those requests of those children back to the main agency and they distribute a huge list to the participants," Juchartz said. "It involves all the children, regardless of their status."

Each wish list contains the participant's first name, last initial, physical and personality profile and six gifts they would like for Christmas. Donors purchase gifts directly for each child. More than 279 separate donor groups are participating in this year's Operation Good Cheer. Companies who volunteer their equipment, fuel and drivers who donate their time, pick up gifts from 31 locations across Michigan.

Gifts will be delivered by volunteer pilots on Dec. 6 to the Alpena County Regional Airport. Child & Family Services will provide a meal or snacks to the pilots.

"Last year we had seven aircraft that flew in and had the presents in them. They don't ask for fuel or monetary support. They basically open their doors and open their hearts," Juchartz said.

Child & Family Services staff from the Alpena office come to assist with unloading the gifts and sometimes teenage girls residing at Hope House will also help. The gifts are then taken back to the office where they're checked, to make sure they don't have inappropriate items, and wrapped. The presents are distributed to the foster children by case workers or foster parents who come to pick up gifts, Juchartz said.

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